

## National Treasures: the Box Turtles of Egmont Key

Egmont Key (Hillsborough County, Florida) maintains a precarious position at the junction between Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. However the ca. 180-ha island is host to a variety of exceptional natural resources.

Visitors may encounter any of the 12 reptiles and 4 amphibians reported from the island, in particular, the Florida Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina bauri*) and the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). Data collected from studies on these species are being used to develop plans for the management and restoration of Egmont's native environment.

Biologists from the U.S. Geological Survey, Florida Integrated Science Center (USGS/FISC), have been especially interested in the box



Measuring a box turtle

turtles of Egmont Key. The population's origin and the length of time that box turtles have been on the island are unknown. However, Egmont Key now hosts one

of the largest and best studied box turtle populations in North America.



Fort Dade on the northwestern side of the island

Since 1991, more than 2400 box turtles have been marked and more than 5200 individual captures have been made in a long term USGS study of the life-history of this declining species.

The project goals include:

- Gathering biological data that will provide immediate assistance in habitat management,
- Monitoring box turtle population dynamics during restoration efforts,
- Documenting effects of increased human activity on box turtle population dynamics,
- Determining spatial and temporal aspects of habitat use by box turtles, their activity patterns, population structure and size, and reproductive activities,
- Determining characteristics of life-history, such as survivorship, growth, disease, and the biology of all age classes.

The box turtles of Egmont Key represent a unique natural, national resource that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Because of the large population size, the relative freedom from predators, and historic physical isolation from human disturbance, information gathered by the USGS on Egmont's box turtles offers a rare glimpse into the life of one of Florida's most familiar but surprisingly little understood animals.



A bright-eyed juvenile

Visitors to the island can assist endeavors to protect and conserve all of Egmont Key's natural resources by:

- Avoiding restricted areas,
- Maintaining a NOLITTER policy;
- Leaving plants and wildlife alone,
- Taking from the island nothing but photographs and memories,
- Leaving nothing behind but temporary footprints in its glittering sands.